

Are we doing 'qual' well enough?

Lisa Baxter touches on some of the issues facing qualitative research in the arts

Recent developments in Arts Council England's priorities bring with it a shift in focus towards understanding better the nature of the audience's relationship with the arts. Qualitative research has a vital role to play in this, but are we up to the job as commissioners of research and research practitioners? My contention is that we are not ... yet.

The arts community needs to wake up to the realisation that the commercial sector has been aware of and capitalised on for over 50 years – that if you want a successful business strategy, create and provide appealing product, develop meaningful brands, nurture customer loyalty and maximise sales, you need to find out what makes your existing and potential audience tick. Qualitative research is the only form of public engagement that can access rich, deep, actionable insights about your audiences and stakeholders in this respect. So why do so few arts organisations seek it out and why are so many resistant to it?

From my experience, and that of my peers, a key factor is the apparent low understanding and appreciation of the role and value of qualitative research within the arts sector as a whole. This is largely because there hasn't been a policy-driven need for it. Consequently, qualitative research has remained peripheral, perceived as an expensive luxury rather than an essential business tool.

The resulting price sensitivity means there are those who commission qualitative research on the basis of cost rather than value, opting for the cheapest rather than the best. What suffers in the long run is excellence, because without the

demand for excellence, where is the drive to deliver it?

Qualitative research delivered from within the arts sector is in its infancy and there is a shortage of suitably qualified practitioners. Add to this the worrying trend of researchers and consultants offering 'qualie-type stuff' to clients (albeit well meant) when they don't have the requisite skills, experience or training, and what you have is the very real danger of the 'dumbing down' of qual practice and the negative impact of that on the quality of the research delivered. We deserve better than that, and to ensure standards we need to focus on credentials, not cost.

So, if you have the credentials and competencies to conduct qualitative research (e.g. appropriate training, MRS membership or rigorously follow the industry standards compulsorily set down by the Market Research Society for its members through its Code of Conduct), state them and raise the bar of client expectations. If you don't, don't offer qualitative research. It's an area of expertise, not an add-on.

More and more artists, programmers and curators are looking to their audiences for insight and inspiration. Increasingly, marketing departments are seeking to understand how their organisation and outputs are experienced and perceived from the audience's perspective. There are a growing number of fledgling arts sector qualitative researchers who are becoming switched on to the value and potential of 'qual'.

With so much potential, and a policy shift that requires a more sophisticated understanding of audiences and publics, steps need to be taken,

through appropriate training and dissemination, to develop both practice and understanding so that researchers and arts clients can work effectively together through excellence in qualitative research practice. Potential advocates and/or training providers include the AMA, TMA, ITC and audience development agencies. So who's going to get the ball rolling? ■



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